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# Review of “Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution”

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# Essays in Philosophy

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## Book Review

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*Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution*, Nicholas Rescher. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Press. Pp. 318. Cloth, \$52.95. ISBN 0-8126-9436-8.

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Professor Rescher has provided us with an interesting introduction to paradoxes. His scope is literally exhaustive; the writing is clear and the content has been made accessible to a wide audience. One can imagine this text replacing many introductory level texts in critical thinking courses; while at the same time many of Rescher's conclusions warrant detailed scrutiny by honours or graduate level students interested in this subject. Indeed, the strength of the book is Rescher's substantively original, even controversial, thesis and its application to paradoxes.

While Rescher follows others in defining 'paradox' as "arising when a set of individually plausible propositions is collectively inconsistent," he departs from the general consensus by defending the possibility of "a general theory of paradoxes" (p. xv). Rescher maintains that despite the particular differences between paradoxes, a general *method*, indeed, a "generic approach to paradox analysis" (p. xv) is available. His goal in this book is to make this method explicit by way of application. As Rescher points out:

The technical literature of logic, mathematics, and philosophy is ... rife with discussions of various types of paradoxes. But these are generally dealt with as so many individual and isolated episodes, each requiring its own characteristic mode of approach. There has been no attempt at uniform, across-the-board approach to the subject of paradoxes and their resolution (p. 5).

So Rescher's burden in this book is not so much to solve each and every particular paradox (there are over one-hundred and thirty discussed at various length in the text), but to make the case that paradoxes themselves, as a class of cognitive issue, have some general features in common. And those general features, if understood correctly, provide an important insight into *how* we ought to go about making sense of the particular paradox in question. While we may not be provided with a "solution," if Rescher is right, we will have a better understanding of the relation between the *particular* plausible propositions and the collective inconsistency generated. (I return to the details of this point momentarily.)

There are thirteen chapters in this book. The first four chapters outline Rescher's aim and the range of his methodology (these chapters include: "Aporetics," "Paradox Solution via Retention Prioritization," "Plausibility as a Guide to Prioritization," and "Levels of Paradoxicality"). It is in these early chapters that one is familiarized with Rescher's method. The remaining chapters involve

Rescher's often meticulously applying that method to famous and not so famous paradoxes. The rest of the chapters are named by the particular species of paradox that Rescher will expose to his method (these chapters include: "Paradoxes of Vagueness," "Paradoxes of Ambiguity and Equivocation," "Philosophical Paradoxes," "Paradoxes of Inappropriate Presupposition" "Mathematical Paradoxes," "Semantical Paradoxes that Involve Conflicting Claims regarding Truth," "Inductive Paradoxes," "Paradoxes of Hypothetical Reasoning," and "Paradoxes of Choice and Decision"). I will say a few words first about the *method*-chapters and then briefly discuss an example of how Rescher's method is to be applied. My hope is to raise some general concerns.

Rescher's first chapter, "Aporetics," names his method – and the discipline involved in the study of paradoxes. He begins by making an instructive distinction between logical and rhetorical paradoxes. The former Rescher construes, rather uncontroversially, as being "a communicative predicament ... a conflict of what is asserted, accepted, or believed" (p. 4). The latter, including expressions such as "Nature imitates art," "Freud was no Freudian," "There's no method in his madness," are all, Rescher suggests, "pieces of descriptive perversity" (p. 4). Rhetorical paradoxes can lead to logical paradoxes, but as they stand, "we have here," Rescher writes, "duplicitous formulations that skate on the thin borderline between sense and nonsense" (p. 4). In contrast, the logical paradox is not skating on this border. Rather, it seems that the latter's cognitive pull depends a great deal on our inability to see past the plausibility of each part and the simultaneous inconsistency of the whole. Clues to paradox *resolution* depend on how these plausible components are interpreted and whether they are (by Rescher's method) retained or rejected.

The aim of aporetic method is to deal with logical paradoxes. "Logical paradoxes," Rescher argues, "always constituted aporetic situations, an *apory* being a group of acceptable-seeming propositions that are collectively inconsistent" (p. 7). The logical contradiction (the paradox) ensues when the individually plausible propositions in aggregate amount to a conclusion that is unacceptable. But the "root" of paradox has to do, if Rescher is correct, with *our* relationship to those claims we find plausible enough to not easily discredit in the aporetic situation (hence the situation arises). "Since paradoxes arise through a clash or conflict among our commitments," he writes, "they are the product of cognitive overcommitment" (p. 9). Paradoxes are a kind of "information overload, a literal embarrassment of riches" (p. 9). According to Rescher, understanding *plausibility* sobers our interpretation of this overload so that we might better be able to systematize our understanding of the particular paradox in question. For this claim to make sense, the nature of the paradox, itself, depends a great deal – if not entirely – on *our* commitment, our cognitive involvement. Indeed, if 'plausibility' rather than 'truth' is the core methodological concept, then *who* understands the paradox is as important as the paradox itself. To put matters differently, what counts as plausible for one person may not count *as plausible* for another. Hence some paradoxes will yield, on a generous reading of Rescher's method, a variety of possible resolutions. On a less generous reading, a given paradox can literally dissolve if one is unable to retain a proposition central to a paradox's structure. On such a reading, it is not so much resolution that is the concern, but dissolution.

To put matters into perspective, the logical paradox, by Rescher's lights, seems circumscribed by our cognitive involvement. Understanding and solving a given paradox depends on how we go about breaking down the apory into its constitutive parts (the plausible propositions) in rank order from most plausible to least. We are here engaged in what Rescher calls "retention prioritization." By prioritizing the propositions we ought to be able to assess the worthiness of each. Our goal is to

reject the proposition or propositions that, when unpacked of the given paradox, individually strike us as implausible. Rescher writes:

By deleting less plausible items from an aporetic cluster so as to restore it to consistency *we purify it*, as it were, in the dictionary sense of this term ‘diminishing the concentration of less desirable materials’ (p. 31).

As is the case with the “problem of evil,” however, atheists and theists may come up with different prioritizations (p. 31). And it seems that rejecting that, for instance, Proposition-1: *God is not responsible for the moral evils of the world as exemplified by the wicked deeds of us humans, his creatures*, does not purify the paradox to consistency, but sterilizes it. A rejection of Proposition-1 is a rejection of the problem of evil. The paradox never arises. It seems that the greater challenge is to provide a resolution by keeping the general integrity of what makes the paradox compelling. Rescher appears to be begging the question here: the reason we reject a given proposition for implausibility is that it generates the paradox.

The famous Liar Paradox is discussed in Chapter Ten, “Semantical Paradoxes that Involve Conflicting Claims regarding Truth.” The liar paradox involves the self-referential statement, “this statement is false.” For this statement to count as “meaningful,” it must, by our generally accepted understanding, be either true or false but not both. If we accept that “this statement is false” is indeed a meaningful statement, then it must be either true or false. But the statement is rendered meaningless because its truth or falsity cannot be determined. Rescher determines that the liar statement is semantically meaningless (p. 202).

This strikes me as fishy. Rescher has to show that what counts as semantically meaningful statement is tied to our being able to determine its truth or falsity. Rejecting the liar paradox as semantically meaningless seems, as before, to beg the question since we are here rejecting the statement that generates the paradox in the first place. What makes the statement “this statement is false” especially compelling as an example of paradox is that it is *semantically meaningful*, but logically incoherent. As long as logic is tied to a kind of self-determining *plausibility*, it is not clear that any method can be properly systematized. Rescher’s method is, however, an excellent attempt.

*Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution* is a good book with a very interesting thesis. While I am not all together sympathetic to Rescher’s method, I believe that it is one worth deliberating upon and discussing.

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